High Tide Now Reached in the Art Galleries

A Period Packed With Shows, Chiefly American

By Royal Cortissoz

The increased importance of New York as a market for the disposition of works of art at public sale is noticeably illustrated in the announcement that the Mesdag collection is to be dispersed here in March. The late Hendrik Willem Mesdag, one of the leading painters of Holland, was an ardent connoisseur. He left at the time of his death, five years ago, a body of studio effects and of paintings by others, as well as by himself, which it was expected would be acquired by the Dutch government for the museum he established at The Hague long ago. Though conditions developed by the war appear to have blocked official action in the matter, there is so much money in Holland to-day, and collectors there are so active, that the likelihood of a sale in Amsterdam, always a prosperous art market, seemed certain. Instead, the painter's belongings are to be disposed of by the American Art Association. They are described as forming a remarkable collection. The examples of Corot, Rousseau and Daubigny are important; there is an exceptional group of drawings by Millet—who is never more interesting than in black and white—and there is, of course, a great mass of work by the modern Dutchmen, Mauve, Israels, Bosboom and the Marises. The collection also contains productions by such types as Monticelli, Mancini and Fortuny. It includes etchings and a number of tapestries.

Individuality Gets Its Chance

After a bout with the influenza it is pleasant and stimulating to return to the galleries. The big shows are in abeyance, save for the display which the American Water Color Society is making at the National Arts Club, and the town is full of those independent exhibitions in which an artist is allowed to present his work at full length. They have never been more numerous, or more amusing. At the Knoedler gallery, for example, four artists thus have their chance. One of them, Miss Matilda Brownell, enjoys an unusual distinction and is subjected to an unusual test. Five new portraits she has painted fill the end wall of the main gallery. All the rest of the space is occupied by brilliant impressionist pictures, the great Renoir lately purchased at the Emmons sale, several of the finest Monets secured on the same occasion, and notable examples of Degas, Sisley, Pissarro and Manet. The Manet is brought, we believe, from a collection in France, one of his café concert studies, a masterpiece of direct and powerful painting. These things fill the room with an atmosphere of triumphant virtuosity. In the midst of it Miss Brownell's restrained method, her tonal quietude, necessarily plays a subordinate rôle. It would take somebody with the sleight-of-hand of Sargent, say, to give back, stroke for stroke, the pyrotechnics of Manet. But Miss Brownell's very different kind of art holds its own in this exacting company by virtue of its soundness and sincerity. Work well done always holds its own.

The fundamental merit of Miss Brownell's portraiture is its really vitalized veracity. The catalogue, with a rather novel particularity, not only gives the names of her sitters, but indicates that she has painted the portrait of "a professor," "a lawyer" or "a musician," as the case may be. The different professions might have been divined, even without the aid of the catalogue, these canvases are so explicit in the revelation of character. Their eloquence reaches a high point in the handsome full length of Miss Virginia Gildersleeve, dean of Barnard College. The slender figure, set against a tapestried background, is clothed in the simplicity of academic cap and gown, but it is portrayed with so much human sympathy, it is so winning in its womanly dignity, that there is no room left for the merely academic air which so often kills portraits of this kind. The color scheme matches the admirable breadth of the artist's conception. Here, as in all her portraits, she has a vitality transcending the ordinary atmosphere of the studio. Her drawing, too, is good. In certain of the portraits of the men—the study of a musician and that one in which a doctor is delineated—it is developed with peculiar firmness and precision.

In one of the smaller neighboring rooms there are landscapes, portraits and flower pieces by Mr. Eugene Speicher. In the first of these categories he discloses the influence of Cézanne, but unlike so many artists who have felt that influence he has not allowed himself to lapse into fumbling, obscure ways. On the contrary his definition of forms is bold and decisive. His art is, indeed, of a robust, full bodied type. He is capable of delicacy in the manipulation of tone, but his habit in general is to paint with a forceful brush. His talent gives pleasure. So, in a very different key, does the talent of Mrs. Caroline Locke, who has one of the upper galleries to herself. She shows portraits and flower pieces. The former have charm, especially the portraits of children. Mrs. Locke's style is exceedingly refined, her studies of women and children have a grace which is heightened by the note of color she has made her own. But the portraits, at the best, must yield precedence to the pictures of flowers. These are exquisite. A composition like the "White Azaleas" is altogether enchanting. To begin with, there is the perfect interpretation of the subject and then comes the glamour of those choice greens and whites, those nuances of ivory and rose, in which she is not only true to nature but decidedly individual. In the next room Mr. Claggett Wilson, who completes the Knoedler quartet, brings forward impressions of the war recorded in the front-line trenches. They are moving to the point of evoking a shudder. Mr. Wilson's method is not ingratiating. He is, in some sort, a "modernist," with the crude technique of an artist indifferent to niceties of form. But what he lacks in manual skill and in æsthetic taste he makes up in the sheer vividness of what he has to say. He gives us the facts of war, raw and bleeding. There is no beauty in his work. There is, in its place, unmistakable truth.

THE OYSTER MARKET AT THE FOOT OF WEST TENTH STREET
(From the painting by J. H. Twachtman, at the Babcock Gallery)

The Artist In the Open Air

There are some interesting American impressionists to the fore just now, men who are not specifically followers of Claude Monet but whose work is plainly tinctured with the impressionist hypothesis of light and air. They are inspiriting. Mr. Max Kuehne, at the Kingore gallery, is said by Mr. Gallatin, whose sympathetic words are quoted in the catalogue, to have been touched by such diverse influences as those of Kenneth Hayes Miller, William M. Chase, Robert Henri and Ernest Lawson. He has studied, too, in the European museums. But the first evidence of his ability lies in the fact that his pictures suggest none of these external sources. On the contrary, they reveal a vigorous personal force. They have been painted on the Maine coast, now studies of old towns and now studies of heavy seas washing colorful rocks. Whatever his theme, Mr. Kuehne is full of energy and his frankly stated truths are bathed in a beautiful luminosity. Besides light and air he has pure and strong color. His exhibition is cordially welcome.

An equally fresh and interesting situation is provided by Mr. John Noble, an American long resident abroad, who has lately returned to this country and now shows at the Daniel gallery, along with French scenes, a few things done at Provincetown. An uncompromising, direct touch is his essential distinction. His color is rich in plangent passages, in sharp contrasts. Best of all, it is flung on the canvas with a gesture that, if seemingly a little rough at times, is really skillful, and, into the bargain, very personal. Mr. Noble is evidently too forthright in his characteristic mood to care at all whether he is beguiling the spectator or not. His accent is frankly assertive. He is hardly ever in the mood to try to charm. Yet occasionally he succeeds in this without trying. Witness the fascinating "Children on the Beach" and the "Berck Plage." The staccato habit which is obviously indurated in him does not wholly leave him in these canvases, but it loses its harshness beside the almost subtle harmonies of color and atmosphere which distinguish them. He is a dashing, audacious painter, as a picture like "The White Horse" makes manifest. And he is a painter who has moments of a deeper, richer significance. We are glad he has come back from Europe.

The paintings by Mr. William L. Carrigan, at the Ferargil gallery, open air paintings like those of Mr. Noble's, exploit a principle to which the latter pays next to no attention. It is the principle of refining upon painted surface and giving character to a canvas through sensuous unity of tone. His artistic forebears, so to say, we would take to be Alden Weir and Emil Carlsen, men whose studies of nature have also been studies of pigment. He, too, is an impressionist in the sense that his analyses of landscape are largely atmospheric. But preoccupation with an effect of tone would appear to be always persistent with Mr. Carrigan. It is relaxed only when he turns to the lighter medium, water color. "The Alps at Le Lauteret," for example, is an almost startling illustration of what this painter can do when he chooses, changing not only his medium but his vision. This is as crisply direct an impression as a water color of Mr. Sargent's—and, by the same token, it is in its brilliance not unworthy of that magician. There is the same ease and breadth, too, there is the same freedom from anything like a fixed idea, in the water color copies after Guardi, Canaletto and other old masters, water colors which are not so much copies as "notes." We well remember the wall paintings in the ancient palace of the Popes at Avignon. Mr. Carrigan's five studies from them bring back all their poetic fragrance. He shows extraordinarily fine taste and feeling in work of this kind.

In his landscapes there is just as much taste and there is an even warmer emotion. There is not, on the other hand, so uniformly sure a touch. The preoccupation to which we have alluded sometimes becomes excessive. The big "Midsummer Masque" offers a case in point. It is a lovely conception, this picture of figures vaguely playful in a sylvan world. The idea, however, is veiled for us by the overwrought, too granulated surface. Technically speaking, one cannot see the wood for the trees. The successful pictures are those of a wintry nature. Mr. Carrigan's predilection for snowy effects is justified. He paints them very sympathetically, interpreting his chill airs with convincing truth. And here he wins with his fidelity to nature a good deal of the beauty of tone at which he aims. The grays of the "Carrigancool," of the "Old Barns," of "The Village," of the "Late Sunlight," are in themselves fine and the true artistic investiture to give to his storm-bound New England scenes. In the studies of still life his closely harmonized minutiæ of color also appear to advantage. In both fields Mr. Carrigan's art would benefit, however, by a certain lessening of its tension, a certain freshening and broadening of his style. It would be interesting to see him tackling the problems he has dealt with in oils with something of the freedom he has used in such of his water colors as the Alpine sketch we have cited.

Mr. John Sloan, at the Kraushaar gallery, shows a number of pictures recently painted in New Mexico. He has painted some of them, we infer, in the open air, and his landscapes have character. He is an artist who has almost, if not quite, beaten out an idiom expressive of himself. But his impressions seem muffled and discounted by heavy-handedness. We have before this had occasion to allude to the want of beauty in his work. Perhaps he is unconscious of it. Perhaps it is something that does not appeal to him. At all events he does not seem to have garnered any rich inspiration in the new region he has explored. The open air studies, as we take them to be, are not luminous. Curiously, the only ones which suggest the quality are the night scenes. In general he has brought back from what we had supposed was a sunny part of the world pictures that are mostly rather dull. There is nothing here comparable to the best canvases he has painted in his observation of New York life.

Mr. Sloan's exhibition has superseded one of paintings by Mr. W. Scott Pyle, which may, nevertheless, be seen for a few days longer at the Kraushaar gallery. There is a single serious handicap to be apprehended in the work of this young artist. His color lacks quality and this is due to crudity in the handling of pigment. It comes out in his portraits and even more in his landscapes. Some of the latter are deplorably "painty" and hard. But upon what a talent has this handicap been momentarily imposed! Beyond all question, Mr. Pyle has the root of the matter in him. He draws not only with accuracy but with a most engaging aplomb. He was born to be a good workman. And his landscapes, especially his souvenirs of New Brunswick lakes, have a sincere quality about them which sets us to thinking of Winslow Homer. It is pleasant to muse upon what Mr. Pyle will be doing when he has refined his color and the sterling merits in his workmanship have swallowed up what is only clever in it now.

In the group of three artists exhibiting at the Macbeth gallery Mr. Charles M. Davis represents the American school of landscape painting as it leans not so much toward impressionism—though affected by that movement—as toward the more definitely pictorial practice of the Barbizon school. He, too, dips his brush in light and air, bathes his scenes in atmosphere, but he is dedicated above all to giving tree and ground forms their full value and to fusing both in a composition to be admired for its own sake. The "Great Oak in Summer" is a good example. It might be described as the portrait of a glorious tree. Mr. Davis poetizes the American countryside without romanticizing it. His is that "natural magic" which endues a scene with beauty yet leaves the scene to speak for itself, a simple, racy episode, in which there is no factitious glamour, only the characterful charm of a New England pasture, of a stone fence straggling along the boundary of the field, of cattle browsing, of brooks and meadows whose sentiment is bound up with American life. He has six canvases in the show and every one of them has this sweet, wholesome quality. Mr. Davis's companions are Mr. F. C. Frieseke and Mr. Richard E. Miller, painters of the type of figure subject which savors of the Paris Salon, but which they are accomplished enough to enrich with an American accent. Mr. Frieseke is the more devoted student of light. His bright color is suffused with sunshine. It lends an agreeable animation to his pictures of pretty women doing nothing in particular in pretty rooms. Mr. Miller gives his similar models a greater solidity and paints their costumes in a lower key. He has contrived to get a more interesting composition in one of his pictures, "The Sun Porch," than in any of the others. Mr. Frieseke and Mr. Miller are both masters of a smooth, effective kind of craftsmanship. They haven't much to say, but their decorative pictures make pleasant company.

PORTRAIT OF A CHILD
(From the painting by George Frost, at the Ehrich Gallery)

A Little Salon Of New Portraits

The National Association of Portrait Painters is holding at the Reinhardt gallery its eighth annual exhibition, showing some thirty-five or forty works. These appearances of a now flourishing organization have a special interest. They isolate an important subject, and in doing so open that subject to severer tests than it is obliged to meet on any other occasions. The portraits scattered through the Winter Academy, for example, may or may not be provocative of exhaustive discussion. When the portrait painters have a show of their own we are bound to take them more seriously. This year, however, as in other seasons, they leave us somewhat dubious. Is there an American school of portraiture? We doubt it. Of course, we are not thinking of a school as a body of men subscribing with unanimity to a given formula. We are thinking of it rather as a body of men so experienced, so trained in this specific field of art as to be expert in a definite idiom. Portraiture, after all, is an art by itself, the art of giving what we can only describe as universality in pictorial terms to the record of a personality. Recall Titian's "Man With the Glove," or Holbein's "Georg Gisze," or the "Bertin" of Ingres. They remain great monuments regardless of the identities they commemorate. Here is where American portraiture as it is illustrated in this exhibition breaks down. It breaks down in the transcendently important matter of design. It was a foible of our figure painters, noted years ago, to neglect composition for the sake of the brilliant technical passage. We have had any number of clever men who have not possessed the staying power for a long inventive flight, but have been superb in the execution of the "morceau." So it has often been and so it still is with the portrait painter.

What has become of the Whistlerian tradition—so closely akin to the Velasquez tradition—of placing the figure on the canvas with a felicity sufficient in itself to compel admiration? In its place we have accomplished brushwork. Mr. George Bellows most conspicuously raises the point in his interesting "Portrait of Mrs. T.," the portrait of an old lady attired in gala dress. It is interesting because as a technical exercise it is so powerful, so brilliant, but as a composition it has no interest whatever. All through the show we are conscious of this indifference to the "ordonnance" of portraiture. The canvases scintillate with manual dexterity. Not once do they disclose originality of design, or, indeed, anything that suggests more than rudimentary balance of form. Perhaps it is a state of things inseparable from the temper of our time. When Mr. Leopold Seyffert paints his "Fritz Kriesler" he makes what is nothing more nor less than a snapshot of his subject, recording what might be almost anybody's impression of the burly violinist. We note the sturdy modeling, the crisp drawing, and we are free to admit that this is an eloquent characterization. But where is that new and felicitous "placing" to which we have alluded? Where is the note of style? In portraiture, if anywhere in art, the subject should be heightened and transmogrified by the creative touch. It is not enough to make it the vehicle of accomplished workmanship. On the other hand, it may be that, as we have said, the present generation wants nothing more than workmanship. Of that there is a plenty in this exhibition, and there is with it, we may add, an abundance of good taste. It is with appreciation, too, that we note the presence here of the fewest possible excursions into mere feminine prettiness. The portraits of women have more often than not the charming seriousness of Mrs. Rand's "Miss Laura Scoville" and Mr. Borie's "The Shade Hat." The collection is uncommonly strong in good portraits of men. Mr. Wayman Adams has done a very fine, serene piece of work in his "John McClure Hamilton." It has admirable companions in the portraits of men by Irving R. Wiles, Mrs. Rand, Philip L. Hale, Charles Hopkinson and George Luks. It is diverting, by the way, to pass from Mr. Luks's interesting "Grand Sachem of the Tammany Society," in which he is perfectly at home, to his portrait of a little girl in a billowing gray farthingale, a well meant echo of Velasquez. The echo, alas, is about ten thousand miles off.

Some Types of French Art

Not in a long time have we had a show of prints quite as exhilarating as the one which is now being made at the Keppel gallery of a selection from the etched works of Besnard. M. Gabriel Mourey, in his book on the painter, has a good saying on these plates. He compared them to the pages of the "journal intime d'un grand écrivan." That is exactly what they are, works in which he has thrown off with peculiar intensity emotions generally omitted from the paintings by which he is known to the world at large. Besnard is a master of portraiture and of decorative painting, perhaps the most distinguished figure in the French art of his time. He is lavish of ideas in his mural compositions and in his easel pictures, but their salient trait is that of a kind of sumptuous pageantry. In his etchings he concentrates on ideas.

They are imaginative, with a somewhat morbid if not macabre tendency. There is nothing decadent in him, yet his plates are not infrequently tinged by that charnel-house emotion which we associate with the art of Felicien Rops. This is especially the case with the series, not represented here, dedicated to "Elle," the series which M. Mourey characterizes as Besnard's "Dance of Death." He has thought much on death and on the tragic side of life. Grimness is chiefly the note of the series of "La Femme," generously illustrated in this exhibition. One cannot look at these without feeling the pressure of a dramatic imagination. The show also amply represents that great element in the art of Besnard, his Venetian instinct for form. It is gloriously revealed in etchings like the beautiful "Femme aux mains jointes." In the treatment of all his subjects Besnard is a painter-etcher if ever there was one, the master alike of line and tone and of color as it is understood by the magicians of the needle. He has long been an intimate friend of Zorn's, and there are hints in his work of the influence of that craftsman. But Besnard is a genius, which is to say that he is his own man. It is indescribably refreshing to come upon an art like his, so original, so robust, so distinguished, so freighted with thought and emotion.

At the Durand-Ruel gallery there is an exhibition of forty-one paintings by Renoir. It is apposite. He died only a short time ago and the recent sensation made by his works in the auction room in New York has served to intensify interest in him. There are several pictures in the present collection which meet this interest, early landscapes like the lovely "Bougival," or the "Seine à Argenteuil," or the luminous garden scene with a figure painted in 1884 (No. 33). Unfortunately, the bulk of the work shown, much of it of late date, suffers from the turgid handling and hot color, upon which the painter in his old age had declined. M. Durand-Ruel, who talked with him on the subject, quotes Renoir as saying that this hot coloration was intentional and would be modified by the passage of time. Meanwhile, it registers an effect far inferior to that which Renoir was wont to achieve in his prime.

Post-Impressionism is illustrated in a handful of fragmentary watercolors by its high priest Cézanne at the Montross gallery. There glimmers up through the group, like shadows emerging upon the surface of troubled waters, that gift for a large, flowing conception of form which he never brought to the point of full development. In the best of the nudes shown there are rich suggestive contours. They are like Cézanne. So often he got in sight of the goal without quite reaching it. There is the same tentative grouping toward structural truths in such a landscape as the "Mount Victory." The exhibition as a whole is amorphous, obscure, and leaves one cold.

M. Gaston Lachaise, who is showing sculptures and drawings at the Bourgeois gallery, is, if we may believe the laudatory preface to his catalogue, an interpreter of high emotion. The single heroic group that he shows, in which a man lifts a woman in his arms, both nude, bears the title of "Love." His subjects, so far as the titles are concerned, have generally a philosophical significance. But looked at regardless of the catalogue, looked at for what they are, M. Lachaise's works seem simply the exaggerated portraits of a grossly fat woman. He is clearly a skilled technician, but he has put his abilities at the service of a morbid and even repulsive idea of form. There are two busts in the collection (Nos. 6 and 8) which have a fine monumental character. They are the only points of charm in the exhibition.

Minor Men Of Some Merit

There is a portrait in the collection of lesser known masters on view at the Ehrich gallery which alone would justify the holding of an exhibition of this kind. It is the "Portrait of a Child," painted by George Frost, of Ipswich. Fame, in the shape of the judicious Bryan, gives him only eight lines of type, noting that he was a

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